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Author(s): Wilfrid Bonser

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MAGICAL PRACTICES AGAINST ELVES.

BY WILFRID BONSER, PH.D.

(*A paper read before the Oxford Meeting of the British Association, 11th Aug., 1926.*)

IN the days before the origin of diseases was known, they were attributed to many erroneous causes, usually of a supernatural nature. The object was malevolence, with or without provocation. The evil was most usually attributed to the elfkind (who attacked with their arrows) or to "flying venom"; these may be taken as the equivalents of sudden indisposition and of infection respectively. A spirit might also act at the suggestion and through the instrumentality of a human enemy: this last comes under the head of sorcery or witchcraft.

These beliefs were widely spread throughout Northern Europe. The Teutonic Æsir themselves, at any rate after the coming of Christianity, were accredited with such malevolence. The passage in the Anglo-Saxon *Lacnunga*

" Be it Æsir shot,
Or be it elf shot,
Or be it witch's shot,
Now will I help thee,"¹

shows the stages of influence—the Æsir, the smaller but still supernatural elves, and the human witch or hag. The Irish *Lorica of St. Patrick* (5th or 6th century A.D.?) seeks for protection "against incantations of false prophets . . . and against spells of women, and smiths, and druids," thus sub-classifying the human element.

¹ *Lacnunga*, 76.

Against such malefic onslaught, man required protection, and, before the coming of medicine, he employed magic.

"Anglo-Saxon, and even Middle-English, literature," says Dr. Singer, "is replete with the notion of disease caused by the arrows of mischievous supernatural beings."² This is called elf-shot, and, according to the same writer, is a characteristic of native Teutonic,—whether Anglo-Saxon or continental,—as opposed to imported magic. It is, however, equally characteristic of Finnish magic, and is probably derived from the Finn by the Teuton, rather than *vice versa*.

Anglo-Saxon elves are represented as small folk dwelling everywhere, but especially in waste places, "where they loved to shoot at the passer-by." The sex of *aelf* seems to be nowhere decisively fixed. It is usually male; the feminine form *ælfen* occurs, however, but only as a suffix, as in *dūnælfen*, *wuduælfen*, etc. In the 13th and 14th centuries the word elf is used of both sexes.³

The Middle-English word *elfe* in the *Promptorium Parvulorum* (1440) is equated with the Latin *lamia*, which seems to denote a sort of female centaur.⁴

The Finnish elves (*Maahiset*) dwell under trees, thresholds, and hearthstones. They are ill-natured, and inflict on mankind ulcers, tetters, ringworm, and other cutaneous diseases. They also especially punish "those who enter new houses without making obeisance to the four corners." The "origin" of elfshot occurs in the *Loitsu-runvoja*:—"I'll get to know thine origin . . . elf-shots have been shot from the regions of divining men . . . from the trampled fields of sorcerers, . . . from the witchery of long-haired hags, . . . from the distant limits of the north, from the

² C. Singer, *The Plant in Early Literature and Art*, p. 143. (MS.) Compare Apollo in the first book of the *Iliad*: Job also attributed his sufferings to the arrows of the Almighty.

³ *New English Dictionary*.

⁴ *Promptorium Parvulorum*, (Camden Society, vol. 25, 1843), p. 138.

wide country of the Lapp, . . . from earth that often must be moved.”⁵

Nixies or water elves “were perhaps personifications of the deadly powers of marshes and water-logged land.”⁶ Such are found in Celtic myth and also in Beowulf (Anglo-Saxon, *Nicor*).⁷ Finnish myth also has them (Finnish, *Lummekoirra*); various water pygmies, for instance, occur in the *Kalevala*,⁸ and Finland is essentially a land of marsh. The following is from a charm to discover the cause of disease: “from waters of witches hast thou (Hiisi) come, from the lilies on a land-locked lake, from the haunts of *lummekoirra*.”⁹

Dr. Singer goes on to quote, “If a man be in the water-elf disease” (*wæter ælf ādle*) “. . . Sing this many times, ‘May earth bear upon thee with all her might and main.’ ”¹⁰ and compares how, when a man has been struck by lightning,—“a form of elf-shot,”—he is interred as far as the neck to extract the evil. Grimm remarks that “the coupling of Alp (Elf) with Donar in [the names] Albthonar and Thôrâlfr is worthy of notice, for *alpgeschoss* (elf-shot) is a synonym for the thunderbolt.”¹¹ Various plants were regarded as granting protection against lightning: such were mistletoe and St. John’s wort.¹²

Apparently the elves were especially addicted to shooting their arrows at the domestic animals. There are various charms for horses that have been elf-shot. The term must be taken as having been meant literally by the Anglo-Saxons. In the *Lacnunga* is the charm:—“If a horse or other beast be shot (*gescoten*), take seed of dock

⁵ *Loitsu-runoja*, § 5. a.

⁶ C. Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁷ The poisonous roots of the water-hemlock are known in Sweden as the *neck-wort*, from *neck*=water-elf (Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, vol. ii, pp. 81-2).

⁸ e.g. in Runes 2 and 48.

⁹ *Loitsu-runoja*, § 5. b.

¹⁰ *Leechbook*, iii, lxiii (O. Cockayne, *Saxon Leechdoms etc.*, vol. ii).

¹¹ J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, vol. i, p. 187.

¹² See T. F. T. Dyer, *The Folk-Lore of Plants*, chap. 4.

and Irish wax, let a mass priest sing twelve masses over them, and put holy water on them, and put it on the horse or what cattle soever it may be.”¹³ The same charm occurs again in the Anglo-Saxon *Leechbook*, the only difference being that this latter says *ōfscoten* instead of *gescoten* and does not specify the mass priest as the *Lacnunga* does.¹⁴ Another *Lacnunga* charm runs :—“ May the beasts on earth be healed, they are stricken indeed in health. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may the devil be cast forth by the laying on of our hands,” and so on. It ends with the third psalm,—“ Lord, wherefore are they increased?”¹⁵

Finally, a curious charm occurs in the *Leechbook* :—“ If a horse be elf-shot (*ōfscoten*), then take the knife of which the haft is horn of a fallow ox, and on which are three brass nails, then write upon the horse’s forehead Christ’s mark and on each of the limbs which thou mayst feel at : then take the left ear, prick a hole in it in silence ; this thou shalt do, then take a staff, strike the horse on the back, then will it be whole. And write upon the horn of the knife these words : ‘ Benedicite omnia opera domini dominum.’ Be the elf what it may, this has power against him as a remedy.”¹⁶ Grimm says that he who looks through the hole made in a beast’s skin by the elf-arrow can see things otherwise hidden.¹⁷

Stitch was supposed to be caused by shots of elves or of witches. “ The white stone,” says the *Leechbook*, “ is powerful against stitch, and against flying venom, and against all unknown maladies.”¹⁸ (Unknown, and therefore caused by witchcraft.) The most realistic verses in the *Lacnunga* describing the onset of witches and their discharge

¹³ *Lacnunga*, 60.

¹⁴ *Leechbook*, i, lxxxviii, 2.

¹⁵ *Lacnunga*, 97, *gif hors bið gescoten*.

¹⁶ *Leechbook*, ii, lxv. 1. Striking the horse was to drive the devil out of him.

¹⁷ J. Grimm, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 460.

¹⁸ *Leechbook*, ii, lxiv.

of "little spears" are a charm against stitch, and illustrate a vivid appreciation of danger:—

"Loud were they, yea loud,
 When they rode over the hill.
 Fierce were they
 When they rode over the land . . .
 Sat a smith,
 A sword he sledged,
 Small the iron,
 Woeful the wound.
 Out little spear,
 If herein thou be !
 Six smiths sat ;
 Battle-spears they wrought.
 . . . Though thou be shot in skin,
 Or shot in flesh,
 Or shot in blood,
 Or shot in bone,
 Or shot in limb,
 May thy life ne'er be shattered.
 Be it Æsir shot,
 Or be it elf shot,
 Or be it witch's shot,
 Now will I help thee." ¹⁹

A Finnish charm for stitch—"Shoot thine arrows into swamps without a knoll," ²⁰ shows that the Finns also considered that the ailment was produced by the agency of marsh-dwelling elves.

The Lapp sorcerer had recourse to arrows and darts with which to inflict injuries. The following Finnish charm "to discover the cause" of disease illustrates their belief in elf-shot as being the cause. "Of thy old mother I'll enquire . . . why thou, Disease, hast made attack, why thou, Elf-shot, hast found thy way into . . . the body of a mother's son. . . . If thou art caused by human skill, . . . I'll get to know thine origin, surely thy birthplace ascertain.

¹⁹ *Lacnunga*, 76.

²⁰ *Loitsu-runvoja*, § 37.

Thence have attacks of sickness come ere now, thence elfshots have been shot, from the regions of divining men . . . from the humid dells of wizards, . . . from the witchery of long-haired hags.”²¹ The following, “to still violence,” is also pertinent: “With what shall I the elfshots squeeze . . . with what extract the sorcerer’s bolts . . .? Only yesterday I was in company with smiths, . . . I got made for me little tongs . . . with which I’ll lift the sorcerer’s bolts. . . . More dreadful are a dead man’s hands . . . with them shall I the elfshots squeeze, tightly compress the fairy darts.”²² Against these arrows and darts the Kalevala heroes were wont to put on armour:—

“Stronger feels a man in armour
As a wizard ’gainst magicians.”

The *Lorica of Gildas* contains prayers to the Deity to

“defend all my parts,
Deliver the whole trunk of my body,
With thine own protecting shield,
That foul demons may not hurl,
As is their wont, their darts at [them].”²³

The neolithic arrow-heads, sometimes picked up on the Downs, are often locally known as elf arrows or elf bolts. They are still used as periapts. There are also elf-shot traditions in Scotland and Ireland. Edward Lhwyd, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, writing in 1699, speaks of the use of “shower stones and elf arrows” as amulets in Scotland. The shower stones, he says, were “in great Esteem for curing of Cattle; and some on May Day put them into a Tub of Water, and besprinkle all their Cattle with that Water, to prevent being Elf-struck.”²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, § 5. (a).

²² *Ibid.*, § 15.

²³ *Lorica*, Second Prologue, lines 2-6.

²⁴ “Extracts of several Letters from Mr. Edward Lhwyd . . . containing Observations . . . made in his Travels thro’ Wales and Scotland,” (*Phil. Trans. R.S.*, vol. 28, 1719), pp. 98-9.

In Ireland, according to Mooney, "the prehistoric arrow-head or *saig-ead* occasionally found in the country, is a fairy dart which has been shot at some man or animal, and thus lost. The fortunate finder can counteract the designs of the fairies." Here, as in Scotland, they are used as a protection against those who originally used them, for "when an illness is supposed to be due to the influence of the fairies, the *saig-ead* is put into a tumbler and covered with water, which the patient then drinks, and, if the fairies are responsible for his sickness, he at once recovers. The *saig-ead* is preserved in some iron receptacle to prevent the fairies stealing it." ²⁵

Wood-Martin speaks of a cow-doctor who "invariably found that the animal was either "elf-shot" or "dinted," or it might be suffering from both troubles." ²⁶ "Elf-shot" was when the arrow had actually pierced the hide, "dinted" was when there was only an indentation, which, however, could be felt. This doctor had himself a collection of arrow-heads. He would order gruel to be prepared and into it he would put some of his arrow-heads, together with a piece of silver and some soot. "When all had been boiled well together, and was ready for use, he would take a mouthful and blow it into the animal's ears, another mouthful and blow it over her back, and then he would give the remainder to the cow to drink, and would go away, assuring the owner that she would soon be better." This treatment illustrates the belief that "like cures like," and also the belief that the possession of something which formerly belonged to the doer of the mischief gives one power against him.

Carmichael, in his collection of charms from the highlands and islands of Scotland, gives two hymns to St. Brigit in

²⁵ J. Mooney, "Medical Mythology of Ireland," (*Proc. Am. Phil. Soc.*, vol. 24, 1887), p. 143.

²⁶ W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, (1902), vol. i, pp. 41-2.

which are allusions to elf-shot. The first is a herding blessing :—

“ Arise, thou Bride, the gentle, the fair, . . .
 Since thou to them madest the rich charm,
 To keep them from straying, to save them from harm.
 From rocks, from drifts, from streams, . . .
 From the *straight arrows of the slender ban-shee*,
 From the heart of envy, from the eye of evil.”

And again :—

“ Every day and every night
 That I say the genealogy of Bride,
 I shall not be killed, I shall not be harried, . . .
 No fire, no sun, no moon, shall burn me,
 No lake, no water, no sea, shall drown me,
 No *arrow of fairy, nor dart of fay*, shall wound me,
 And under the protection of my Holy Mary,
 And my gentle foster-mother is my beloved Bride.”²⁷

The mischief from elves takes various forms in Anglo-Saxon leechdoms. Sometimes the charm is merely (1) “ against an elf.”²⁸ (A.S. *ælf*: M.H.G. *alp*—alp, nightmare). Sometimes it is against the (2) “ elfkind ”²⁹ (A.S. *ælfeynn*), sometimes against (3) “ elf-disease ”³⁰ (A.S. *ælfād*l), sometimes (4) the “ water-elf-disease ”³¹ (A.S. *wæter ælfād*le) though what this was is unknown, (*wæter-ād*l, is, of course, dropsy): sometimes against (5) the “ influence of elves ” (A.S. *ælsiden*=also nightmare: Latin, *impetus castalidum, diaboli incubus*). In the charm, “ This is the holy drink against the influence of elves and all temptations of the field,”³² the heathen and the Christian demons are classed together and therefore curable by the same charm. The word occurs again in the first *Leechbook*, “ Against

²⁷ A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. i, pp. 279, 175.

²⁸ e.g. *Leechbook*, ii, lxv. 5.

²⁹ e.g. *Ibid.* iii, lx.

³⁰ e.g. *Ibid.* iii, lxii.

³¹ e.g. *Ibid.* iii, lxiii.

³² *Lacnunga*, ii, and *Leechbook*, iii, xli.

every evil witch (A.S. *leōdrūne*) and against the influence of elves," a written charm in Greek letters providing the remedy.³³

The form (6) *ælsogotha* is also found. ("*Sogotha*" is hiccough, or perhaps heartburn.) This disease was supposed to be from elfin "possession," as is seen from the (Latin) charm used to expel it, which runs as follows: "Almighty God . . . expel from thy servant N, through the laying on of this writing, all attack of the *castalides*, from his head, from his hair [and from all parts of his body]." ³⁴ The *castalides* are the Muses, a name derived from the fountain Castalia on Parnassus, which was haunted by them, but here equated with *dūnælfe*.³⁵

"Elf-cake," according to the *New English Dictionary*, is an enlargement of the spleen, so called because it was attributed to the agency of the elves. It is perceptible externally to the touch.

The term *ilfig* signifies "mad, frantic," and presumably a man in this condition was therefore considered to be affected by elves.

Ælfthone (Enchanter's nightshade) was so called since it was employed as a remedy for elf-disease (*ælfād*l). It must be first laid under the altar and have nine masses sung over it: then three bits of it must be given to the patient to eat, and finally it must be laid on hot embers which are placed near him to make him sweat.³⁶

Elf-dock (or elf-wort) is another name for elecampane (*helenium*).

Elf-grass is "a kind of grass yerbwives find, and give to cattle they conceive injured by elves."³⁷

³³ *Leechbook*, i, lxiv (wrongly translated by Cockayne, "against every evil rune lay, and one full of elvish tricks").

³⁴ *Ibid.* iii, lxii.

³⁵ Bosworth-Toller. See also Wright's *A:-S. Vocabularies*, 60, 19.

³⁶ *Leechbook*, iii, lxii.

³⁷ Quoted in J. Britten and R. Holland, *A Dictionary of English Plant-Names*, p. 533, with the remark, "We do not know what is meant."

In the 14th century medical manuscript there are two recipes which indicate elfin influence. One is, "For man or woman that is blisted³⁸ with wikkede spiritis to do away the ache and abate the swellyng"; the other is, "For the elf-cake" (see *supra*). In this last case the patient "schal ben hol wit-Inne. ix. dayes and ix nightis, gif he schal lyue."³⁹

The charm "Pur le blastyng de mal esprit" is presumably for an eruption on the face which was thought to be produced by the breath of the evil spirit.⁴⁰

When Christianity came,⁴¹ the elves of heathendom were equated with demons, and therefore elf-shot and flying venom were thought to be the same as demoniacal possession (*deōfol-seōcnes*). Mugwort, mandrake, and periwinkle "put to flight devil sickness." The charms were, therefore, modified to suit, and it became necessary "against elf-disease" to dip the herbs in hallowed water, to lay them under the altar, sing psalms and masses over them, and perform other Christian ritual practices,—often in addition to the old heathen rites,—before the drink or salve might be safely administered or the demon exorcised.⁴²

The personal nature of the demons who were supposed to cause disease is shown from a charm "against a strange swelling. Sing upon thy leech finger a paternoster, and draw a line about the sore, and say, 'Fuge diabolus.'"⁴³ This casts out the demon which had caused the swelling. The literal application of a text for this purpose is found as late as the 14th century, when John of Gaddesden prescribed for epilepsy that the patient, after fasting, con-

³⁸ = "to blow or breathe on balefully."

³⁹ MS. Harl. 2378, pp. 46 and 47. Quoted in G. Henslow, *Medical Works of the 14th Century*, p. 89.

⁴⁰ B. M. Addit. 33996, 1130 (Heinrich, *Ein mittellenglisches Medizinbuch*, p. 171).

⁴¹ Cf. for association of the two, the lines: "Adiuro te Satanae diabolus aelfae." MS. Royal. 2A. xx, fol. 45 v.

⁴² See *Leechbook*, iii, lxii, for a good example.

⁴³ Quoted by O. Cockayne, *Saxon Leechdoms etc.*, vol. i, p. 394.

fession, and attendance at mass, should wear round his neck the writing "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."

The elves were regarded as the source of apparitions, especially at night, and therefore of nightmare. Thus, one finds charms against "the elf-kind and nocturnal goblins," the remedy being to perform various ceremonies over a collection of herbs, and finally throw them into running water.⁴⁴

The Anglo-Saxon Herbal finds in betony a shield from "frightful nocturnal goblins and terrible sights and dreams."⁴⁵ Similarly, a Welsh charm prescribes "to prevent dreaming, take the leaves of betony, and hang about your neck, or else drink the juice on going to bed."⁴⁶ Vervain is supposed to have a similar effect.⁴⁷ The *Leechbook* gives the following, betony again being part of the remedy:—"If a mare ride a man, take lupins and garlic and betony, and incense, bind them on a fawn's skin, let the man have the worts on him."⁴⁸ Some plants presumably were thought to cause dreams, as well as being used as a remedy against them. It was said, for instance, of leeks in old Welsh medicine that "they produce terrible and fearful dreams."⁴⁹

There are various animal charms for apparitions in Sextus Placitus.⁵⁰

There appear to be no mineral remedies for apparitions in Anglo-Saxon times. In Anglo-Norman times, however, the jasper was carried as an amulet for this purpose. "Fantosma toilt a tute gent ; Si se volt porter en argent."⁵¹ So also was the diamond: "Sompnia et visiones et fantasmata non eum terrebunt" who bears it, if he has led a pure

⁴⁴ *Leechbook*, iii, lxi. ⁴⁵ See also *Leechbook*, ii, lxxv, 5, and iii, liv.

⁴⁶ *Physicians of Myddvai*, Part 2, § 399.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, § 220.

⁴⁸ *Leechbook*, i, lxiv.

⁴⁹ *Meddygon Myddveu*, Part 1, § 135.

⁵⁰ E.g. v. 12, ix. 1, x. 1.

⁵¹ Marbode's *Lapidary*: (First French version), iv, lines 161-2.

life, "nec quicquam ei nocebit."⁵² According to Benoni, the onyx was said to cause nightmare for this reason:—"in the onyx is a demon, imprisoned in the stone, who wakes only at midnight, causing terror and disturbance to sleepers who wear it."

But the best charm for nightmare⁵³ is in the *Lacnunga*. One must take seven little wafers, and write on each wafer the name of one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. The description of a nightmare, in the incantation which follows, is most vivid:—

"Here came marching in
A creature all swathed.
He had his bridle
In his hand.
Said that thou
Wert his steed,
Laid his bonds
On thy neck.
Then began they to sail off the land.
As soon as they came off the land,
Then began they to cool.
Then came in
The prince's [dwarf's?] sister.
Then she made an end,
And oaths she swore
That never this one the sick should harm
Or him who might
Obtain this charm,
Or understand
This charm to sing.
Amen, fiat."⁵⁴

This is to be sung first into the left ear of the sufferer, then

⁵² Alphabetical Lapidary, *Arundel MS.* 342, fol. 71-8.

⁵³ *Lacnunga*, 56. Translation by Mr. J. H. G. Grattan.

⁵⁴ A.-S. *ðweorh*: literally, therefore, "for a dwarf." Cockayne mis-copied as *weorh* and translates "for a warty eruption."

into his right, then over his head, and finally hung round his neck by one who is a maiden,—thus for three days.

That nightmare was regarded as no slight matter is shown by the story in the *Heimskringla* of the Swedish King Vanland's death from nightmare produced by magical means. His Finnish wife, Drift, owing to his continued absence from her in Sweden, made a bargain with a witchwife, Huld, "that she was to draw Vanland to Finland by spells or else slay him." He wished to return to Finland, but his counsellors forbade him and he said "that the magic of the Finns was busy." "Then he became heavy with slumber, . . . but when he had slept for a short space, he cried out and said that the mare was treading him. His men went to him and would help him; but when they went to his head, she betrod his legs, so that they were nigh broken, and when they went to his legs, she so smothered the head of him that there he died." ⁵⁵

This belief in nightmare goes back to classical times, for Pliny says that magicians assure us "that persons who are apt to be troubled by the gods of the night and by Fauni will experience relief by rubbing themselves morning and evening with the tongue, eyes, gall, and intestines of a dragon, boiled in oil and cooled in the open air at night." ⁵⁶

A cure for nightmare may be found as late as Gerarde's time. He says of the peony: "The black grains [*i.e.* seeds] to the number of fifteene taken in wine or mead is a speciall remedie for those that are troubled in the night with the disease called the night mare . . . and they are also good against melancholicke dreames." ⁵⁷

Akin to the elves were the dwarfs. Sextus Placitus has a remedy consisting, as is usually the case, of unpleasant ingredients, "to do away a dwarf." It is to be administered "ere the hour of the hour of the dwarf's arrival, whether

⁵⁵ *Ynglinga Saga*, 16.

⁵⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, c. xxx, 24.

⁵⁷ J. Gerarde, *The Herball*, (1636), p. 984 (Peionie).

by day or by night it be ; his access is terribly strong, and after that it diminishes and departs away.” ⁵⁸

“ At times he writhes, as if against a dwarf ” ⁵⁹ is a description of one of the symptoms of asthma, and illustrates the close association in the Anglo-Saxon mind of dwarf and nightmare.

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⁵⁸ ix. 17.

⁵⁹ περὶ διδάξεων, 51.